

Research on Han dynasty stone reliefs and the culture of swords in ancient China

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Abstract: To study the culture of swords in ancient China, this research employs field investigations and literature review to collect and organize rubbings of Han Dynasty stone reliefs that depict sword-related cultural content. By analyzing these materials alongside historical records, the study explores the culture of swords in ancient China and the spirit of the era it embodies. Findings: The Sword of Integrity illustrates the virtue of upholding trust and righteousness praised in ancient Chinese society; the Sword of Fashion reveals the widespread popularity of wearing swords in ancient China; the Sword of Defense underscores the significant role of swords in personal protection; the Sword of Loyalty fully demonstrates principles and beliefs in loyalty, trust, and righteousness, which were celebrated and advocated in a society deeply influenced by Confucian culture; the Sword of Brotherhood showcases the courage and friendship of sacrificing one's life for righteousness, reflecting the chivalrous spirit highly esteemed during the Warring States, Qin, and Han periods; and the Sword of Performance and the Sword of Combat highlight the profundity of swordsmanship and the refinement of its techniques.

Keywords: Han Dynasty stone reliefs, ancient China, sword culture, research

1. Introduction

Sword culture is a vast cultural system that centers on humanity, takes the sword as its vehicle, and focuses on swordsmanship, encompassing aspects such as swords, sword artifacts, sword dances, and theoretical frameworks related to swords. Han Dynasty stone reliefs contain numerous depictions of sword culture, yet no scholar has conducted an in-depth study on this subject. This paper collects and organizes images depicting sword culture in Han Dynasty stone reliefs, analyzes them in conjunction with historical documents, and examines the sword culture of ancient China. The aim is to contribute to the promotion of traditional Chinese sports culture, the exploration of traditional Chinese sports, and the enrichment of the traditional sports system of the Chinese nation.

2. Research methods

Field investigations were conducted at historical museums such as the Nanyang Han Dynasty Stone Relief Museum, the Tengzhou Han Dynasty Stone Relief Museum, and the Shandong Han Dynasty Stone Relief Museum. Additionally, collections of Han Dynasty stone reliefs, including the Complete Collection of Chinese Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs, the Selected Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs of Tengzhou, and the Selected Han Dynasty Stone Reliefs of Nanyang, were reviewed. Relevant materials were also sourced from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Rubbings of Han Dynasty stone reliefs depicting sword culture were collected and analyzed alongside historical documents to study the characteristics of ancient Chinese sword culture and the spirit of the era it embodies.

3. Research findings

3.1. The popularity of wearing swords

The custom of wearing swords was highly prevalent in ancient China and has a long history. As early as the Zhou Dynasty, it was stipulated: "At the age of twenty, the Son of Heaven assumes the crown and wears

a sword; at thirty, feudal lords assume the crown and wear a sword; at forty, officials assume the crown and wear a sword." (Chuxue Ji quoting Jiazi) The Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of Qin also records: "In the sixth year of Duke Jian, officials were first ordered to wear swords." Generally, wearing a sword was a privilege reserved for the aristocracy and officials.

"Swords are the martial equipment of gentlemen, used for self-defense, and should never be removed." (Book of Han: Biography of Jun Buyi) However, the practice of wearing swords among the common people remained popular for a time, particularly during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. The Chu Ci: Crossing the River states: "Carrying a long sword, majestic and imposing; wearing a towering hat, lofty and grand." This indicates that wearing swords was a shared fashion among both the court and the common people.

3.1.1. *The sword of integrity*

The Records of the Grand Historian: The Hereditary House of Wu Taibo records: "When Jizha first served as an envoy, he passed through the state of Xu. The lord of Xu admired Jizha's sword but dared not speak of it. Jizha understood this in his heart, but as he was on a diplomatic mission to a greater state, he could not present it. Upon returning to Xu, the lord of Xu had already died. Jizha then took off his treasured sword, hung it on a tree by the lord of Xu's tomb, and departed."

The story of Jizha gifting the sword is often depicted in stone reliefs. A carving on the Gao Yi Que in Ya'an, Sichuan, as shown in Figure 3, portrays the story of Jizha offering the sword. The left side of the carving depicts a tomb with a tree beside it, a sword hanging from the tree, and a person bowing before the tomb—this is Jizha. Jizha had already "promised in his heart" to give the sword to the lord of Xu during his lifetime, and after the lord's death, he still honored this commitment, determined to fulfill the "promise in his heart." When no one could personally receive the sword he had pledged, Jizha insisted on hanging it before the lord of Xu's tomb to fulfill his promise. In the Records of the Grand Historian, the sword is portrayed as a symbol of noble moral conduct. For thousands of years, the legend of Jizha hanging the sword has been passed down, with Jizha revered as a moral exemplar of the Chinese nation's virtue of keeping promises. The story of Jizha gifting the sword, on the one hand, illustrates the peak popularity of sword admiration during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, and on the other hand, praises Jizha's act of integrity. It also demonstrates that the Chinese nation upheld the virtue of trustworthiness and righteousness since ancient times.

3.1.2. *The sword of fashion*

Many Han Dynasty stone reliefs also depict figures wearing swords, further illustrating that wearing swords was a fashion at the time. A stone relief unearthed at Guanzhuang, Mizhi County, northern Shaanxi, as shown in Figure 2, portrays a scene of two individuals meeting. In the center of the image, both figures are wearing long swords and greeting each other with clasped hands, with a young attendant standing behind each. Another stone relief unearthed at Yinanzhai, Linyi, Shandong, as shown in Figure 3, depicts a conversation between two people. Both are wearing ceremonial crowns with tassels and long swords. Additionally, a stone relief unearthed at Panjiatuan, Fei County, Linyi, Shandong, as shown in Figure 4, shows two figures facing each other with swords, jointly holding a scroll. These images indicate that in the social interactions of the ancient Chinese nobility, wearing swords was not only highly popular but also a fashion statement. This also reveals the extreme prevalence of wearing swords in ancient China.

3.1.3. *The sword of defense*

Naturally, wearing swords was not only a fashion but also served a defensive purpose. The Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of Gaozu records: "Gaozu, having drunk, was passing through a marsh at night and ordered a man to walk ahead. The man ahead returned and reported, 'There is a large snake blocking the path ahead. It is advisable to turn back.' Gaozu, intoxicated, said, 'A brave man forges ahead—what is there to fear?' He then proceeded forward, drew his sword, and struck, beheading the snake." Han Dynasty stone reliefs also feature scenes with the theme of "Gaozu Slaying the Snake." A stone relief unearthed from a Han tomb at the Knitting Factory in Tanghe County, Nanyang, Henan, as shown in Figure 5, depicts the scene of Gaozu slaying the snake. The carving shows a servant wearing a crown, holding a battle-axe with both hands, its handle broken, leaning backward. The figure in front of the servant is likely Gaozu (Liu Bang),

with his crown tossed into the air, eyes wide, mouth agape, wielding a long sword to forcefully strike the large snake before him. On one hand, Gaozu's sword in this tale is believed to possess the power to slay demons and ward off evil, while on the other hand, it also demonstrates the defensive function of the long sword.



Figure 1: Stone Carvings of Gao Yi Que in Ya'an, Sichuan



Figure 2: Excavated at Guanzhuang, Mizhi County, Northern Shaanxi, China



Figure 3: Excavated at Yinanzhai, Linyi, Shandong, China



Figure 4: Excavated at Panjiatuan, Fei County, Linyi, Shandong, China



Figure 5: Excavated at Tanghe Knitting Factory, Nanyang, Henan, China



Figure 6: Stone Relief from Wu Family Shrine, Jiexiang, Jining, Shandong, China

3.2. The chivalrous swordsman

3.2.1. *The sword of loyalty and righteousness*

The theme of "righteousness" is one of the most richly depicted subjects in Han Dynasty stone reliefs. It primarily reflects the ideals of honoring commitments and repaying kindness, often illustrated through stories of servants or friends sacrificing their lives for their masters or companions out of loyalty. Examples include "Jing Ke Assassinating the King of Qin," "Gao Jianli Assassinating the King of Qin," "Nie Zheng Assassinating the Prime Minister of Han," "Zhuan Zhu Assassinating King Liao of Wu," "Yu Rang's Two Attempts on Zhao Xiangzi," and "Yao Li Assassinating Qing Ji." These stories are largely recorded in the *Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Assassins*. Sima Qian highly praised these assassins in his work: "From Cao Mo to Jing Ke, these five individuals, whether they succeeded or failed in their missions, were resolute in their intentions, unwavering in their convictions, and their names have been passed down through the ages—this is no accident!" In addition to assassin stories, there is also the tale of "Two Peaches Killing Three Warriors," in which the warriors commit suicide for the sake of brotherly loyalty.

Among the unearthed stone reliefs, the theme of "Jing Ke Assassinating the King of Qin" appears most frequently. A stone relief from Jiexiang, Shandong, as shown in Figure 6, depicts a pillar in the center with a short sword stuck in it—the very sword Jing Ke threw at the King of Qin. To the left of the pillar is Jing Ke,

while to the right is the King of Qin, his right sleeve severed. Lying face-up on the ground is Qin Wuyang. The enduring popularity of the story of Jing Ke's assassination attempt likely stems from the tragic figure of Jing Ke himself, who embodies principles and beliefs of loyalty, trustworthiness, and righteousness. These virtues were celebrated and promoted in a society deeply influenced by Confucian culture and are an indispensable part of ancient Chinese sword culture.

3.2.2. *The sword of comradeship and loyalty*

In Han Dynasty stone reliefs, depictions of swordsmen are not limited to stories of assassins; they also include scenes based on the tale of "Two Peaches Killing Three Warriors." A Han Dynasty stone relief from Nanyang, as shown in Figure 7, portrays a scene where a warrior reaches toward a tall-footed plate containing two peaches, while two other warriors are cutting their own throats with swords. On the right, three figures are depicted, with the shorter one likely being Yan Ying. The *Yanzi Chunqiu* records and promotes the story of Yanzi (Yan Ying) causing the deaths of the three warriors, emphasizing Yanzi's cleverness and wisdom. However, the depiction of "Two Peaches Killing Three Warriors" in Han Dynasty stone reliefs may carry a different implication. Many of these reliefs focus solely on the scene of the three warriors contending for the two peaches, often omitting Yanzi, the figure who should be most celebrated. This representation may stem from two reasons: first, by removing or downplaying Yanzi's image, the depiction of the three warriors becomes more concise and prominent; second, the portrayal of the three warriors serves to highlight the loyalty and camaraderie among friends, promoting the spirit of sacrificing one's life for righteousness. The emphasis on the three warriors in these reliefs suggests that, rather than admiring Yanzi's wisdom, people placed greater value on the loyalty and friendship demonstrated by the three warriors in sacrificing their lives for righteousness. This spirit of sacrificing one's life for righteousness and camaraderie was precisely the chivalrous ethos most revered during the Warring States, Qin, and Han periods.



Figure 7: Excavated at Yingzhuang, Nanyang, Henan, China

3.3. The profound art of the sword

The *Book of Han: Treatise on Literature* records thirty-eight chapters of *The Art of the Sword*, which, unfortunately, are now lost. The *Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of Xiang Yu* notes: "When Xiang Yu was young, he attempted to study writing but gave up. He then tried to learn swordsmanship but also failed." This indicates Xiang Yu's lack of interest in mastering swordsmanship, while also indirectly highlighting the profound depth of the art of the sword, which is not easily mastered. The *Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Assassins* records: "Jing Ke enjoyed reading books and practicing swordsmanship. He attempted to persuade Lord Yuan of Wei with his skills but was not employed." This suggests that even a swordsman of Jing Ke's caliber, whose name has endured through the ages, was not considered exceptionally skilled, further underscoring the profound and intricate nature of swordsmanship, which is beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals. Depictions of swordsmanship in Han Dynasty stone reliefs primarily focus on performance-oriented sword dances and combat in warfare.

3.3.1. *The sword of performance*

Due to its diverse movements, vigorous strength, fluidity, elegance, and rhythmic beauty, swordsmanship served not only functions of combat and physical fitness but also emotional expression and

performance. The Records of the Grand Historian: Annals of Xiang Yu describes the scene at the Hongmen Banquet: "Zhuang entered to offer a toast. After the toast, he said, 'While Your Majesty and the Prince of Pei drink, there is nothing in the army to provide entertainment. May I perform a sword dance?'" This illustrates that sword dances were a form of entertainment during the Spring and Autumn, Warring States, Qin, and Han periods. A stone relief unearthed at Caocun Donggang, Suxian, Huaibei, as shown in Figure 8, depicts a scene believed to be from the Gongmo Dance. (The Gongmo Dance was a large-scale song and dance performance created after Liu Bang became emperor, reflecting on his military life and based on the historical event of the Hongmen Banquet.) In the image, the swordsman on the left is likely Xiang Zhuang, while the one on the right is Xiang Bo. Xiang Zhuang holds a sword, intending to strike Liu Bang, while Xiang Bo uses his sword to parry Xiang Zhuang's attack, shielding Liu Bang with his body. Behind Xiang Bo is likely Liu Bang, wearing a square-shaped crown and a robe, with arms spread open, feigning calm as if to say, "Do not harm others." To Liu Bang's right is Xiang Yu, with arms extended and body turned in a dancing posture. To Liu Bang's left is Zhang Liang, wearing a robe with striped patterns, with hands clasped in a gesture of deference, appearing deeply uneasy. The sword dance performance at the Hongmen Banquet, on one hand, vividly captures the dramatic intensity of the moment, while on the other hand, it highlights that sword dance performances were a common form of entertainment in the military during the Qin and Han periods in China.

A Han Dynasty stone relief unearthed in Balihe Village, Kanzhuang Town, Zoucheng, Shandong, as shown in Figure 9, reflects folk sword dance performances. In the left part of the scene, inside a building, a figure wearing a crown and a robe sits upright with hands clasped in a formal gesture. Outside the building, another person kneels with both hands on the ground. Above them, two individuals engage in a sword dance combat performance. The swordsman on the right wears a robe, holding a short weapon in his right hand raised above his head to block the opponent's downward strike, while his left hand grasps a long sword, lunging forward in a bow stance to thrust at the opponent's head. The movements flow seamlessly, resembling running water. The figure on the left wears a short skirt, holding a long sword in his left hand to attack while bending his legs and leaning back to evade the opponent's thrust, using a short weapon in his right hand to parry the incoming strike. The exchange of blades between the two is swift and graceful, as if the whistling sounds of swinging swords can be heard, creating a spectacular scene that showcases their exceptional swordsmanship. The performers in this depiction are clearly swordsmen hired or maintained by the host specifically for entertainment.

A stone relief unearthed at Huanglutun, Guoli Town, Zoucheng, Jining City, as shown in Figure 10, portrays a sword dance performance as part of a variety show. On the left side of the scene, two individuals face off, each wielding a sword in both hands. The swordsman on the right assumes a left bow stance, thrusting a sword in his left hand swiftly toward the opponent's head while stepping forward with his left foot. Simultaneously, his right arm is extended, holding a sword drawn back in preparation for a second attack. The swordsman on the left adopts a left empty stance, with his left leg slightly bent in front and his right leg half-bent behind, leaning back slightly. While swiftly evading the opponent's thrust, he uses the sword in his left hand to deflect the attack, while the sword in his right hand is drawn back and downward, poised for a counterstrike. Their movements are graceful, fluid, powerful, and majestic, vividly illustrating the swordsmen's extraordinary skill.



Figure 8: Excavated at Donggang, Caocun, Suxian County, Huaibei, Anhui, China

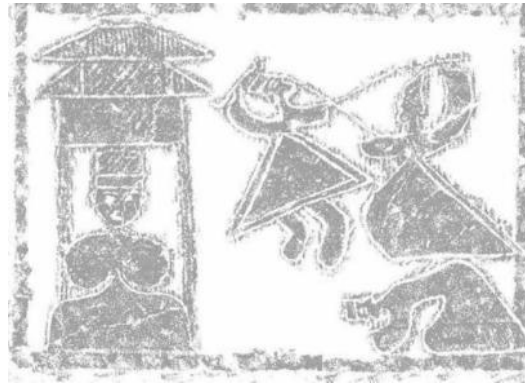


Figure 9: Excavated at Balihe, Kanzhuang Town, Zoucheng City, Shandong Province, China



Figure 10: Excavated at Huanglutun, Guoli Town, Zoucheng City, Jining City, Shandong Province, China

3.3.2. *The sword of combat*

Combat skills with swords are a major component of ancient Chinese sword culture. The Records of the Grand Historian: Biographies of Huainan and Hengshan records: "In the fifth year of Yuanshou, the crown prince practiced swordsmanship, believing no one could match him. Hearing that the guardsman Lei Bei was skillful, he summoned him for a match. Lei Bei repeatedly declined but accidentally struck the crown prince." This illustrates that sword duels were common among those practicing swordsmanship in the Han Dynasty. A stone relief unearthed in Longyang Town, Tengzhou, Shandong, as shown in Figure 11, depicts two warriors in pre-duel stances. Both wear long-tasseled crowns and kneel on one knee, with the left leg bent in front and the right knee on the ground. The warrior on the left, wearing a long sword at his waist, stares intently at his opponent, his left hand holding the scabbard while his right hand is poised to draw the sword in front of his body. The warrior on the right raises his left hand in a pre-duel salute, while his right hand holds a short battle-axe drawn back, ready to attack. A short sword is planted in the ground between them, likely belonging to the warrior on the right. The scene is static yet dynamic, with combat imminent.

Another stone relief unearthed in Bishan County, Chongqing, as shown in Figure 12, also portrays fighters in pre-duel stances. Both warriors hold short swords, standing about three paces apart. The warrior on the left wears a long robe tied at the waist, his right hand holding a sword extended forward with the tip pointing vertically downward, and his left hand holding a shield, eyes fixed on the opponent. The warrior on the right wears a short garment, his right hand holding a sword extended toward the opponent with the tip angled upward, and his left hand holding a shield in front of his chest, eyes locked on the opponent, focused and alert. Through these images, we can understand the pre-duel stances of ancient Chinese swordsmen, which are also part of ancient Chinese sword culture.

Combat in warfare was even more intense and perilous. A stone relief unearthed in Hongshan Village, Jiexiang, Shandong, depicts a scene of conflict between the Han and the northern tribes, as shown in Figure 13. Five individuals are engaged in a life-and-death duel. The leftmost figure holds a shield in his left hand to his side and a sword in his right hand resting on his left shoulder, facing forward, ready to join the fray. The second figure from the left is locked in fierce combat with the central figure, who wears a pointed hat, clearly a tribesman. The tribesman holds a sword in his right hand, steps forward with his left foot, and sweeps the sword from right to left toward the second figure from the left, while his left hand swings the sword backward. In this critical moment, the second figure from the left, likely a Han soldier, quickly crouches, assuming a resting stance, evading the opponent's blade while thrusting his sword swiftly with his right hand. His left hand raises the sword upward, preparing for a second strike, turning the tide in his favor.

The outcome of the fight between the two figures on the right is already decided. The second figure from the right, with a sword in his right hand, steps forward with his right foot and swiftly thrusts into the abdomen of the first figure on the right, while his left hand swings the sword backward and upward, poised for another strike. The first figure on the right, wearing a pointed hat and likely a tribesman, is struck in the abdomen, leaning backward as he falls.

From these depictions, it is evident that warriors displayed versatile swordsmanship and exquisite skills in combat, laying the foundation for the legacy of Chinese warriors.

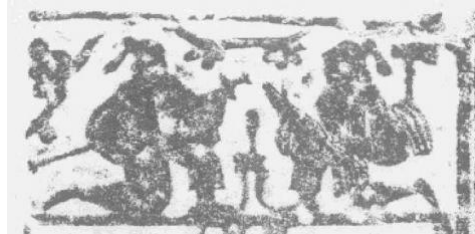


Figure 11: Excavated in Longyang Town, Tengzhou City, Shandong Province, China

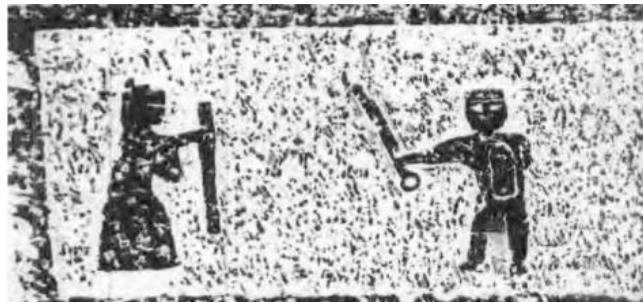


Figure 12: Excavated in Bishan County, Chongqing, China



Figure 13: Excavated in Hongshan Village, Jiaxiang County, Shandong Province, China

4. Conclusion

The culture of swords in ancient China is reflected in depictions of social life, variety performances, warfare and combat, as well as chivalrous swordsmen and assassins. The Sword of Integrity illustrates the virtue of upholding trust and righteousness cherished by the Chinese nation since ancient times. The Sword of Fashion reveals the widespread popularity of wearing swords in ancient China. The Sword of Defense highlights the significant role of swords in personal protection. The Sword of Loyalty fully embodies principles and beliefs in loyalty, trust, and righteousness, which were celebrated and promoted in a society deeply influenced by Confucian culture. The Sword of Brotherhood showcases the courage and friendship of sacrificing one's life for righteousness, reflecting the chivalrous spirit highly esteemed during the Warring States, Qin, and Han periods. The Sword of Performance and the Sword of Combat demonstrate the profundity and refinement of swordsmanship, marking the origins of Chinese martial arts.

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